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POLICY ISSUES

The environmental situation in the occupied Palestinian and other Arab territories

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The present report reviews the implementation of Governing Council decision 17/31 which requested the Executive Director, inter alia, to update the report on the state of the environment in the occupied Palestinian and other Arab territories and to provide the necessary technical assistance in Palestinian institutional and self-capacity-building in the field of the environment.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

The Governing Council,

Recalling the decisions of the Governing Council on the environmental situation in the occupied Palestinian and other Arab territories, and relevant resolutions and decisions of the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council,

Recalling also the results of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, particularly principle 23 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development,

Taking note of the Executive Director's report on the environmental situation in the occupied Palestinian and other Arab territories,

(a) Notes with satisfaction the progress which has been made in the Middle East peace process since the last session of the Governing Council;

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* UNEP/GC.18/1.

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(b) Welcomes the activities which the United Nations Environment Programme is undertaking within the framework of the Multilateral Working Groups of the Middle East peace talks, and requests the Executive Director to continue to intensify such support;

(c) Expresses its concern over the continued degradation of the environmental conditions in the occupied Palestinian and other Arab territories, including those in the Palestinian National Authority, and urges the United Nations Environment Programme to take a prominent role in the activities of the Secretary-General's Special Coordinator for the Occupied Territories in order to ensure that environmental concerns are given due priority in all the cooperative programmes under the jurisdiction of his office.

The environmental situation

1. Since the adoption of decision 17/31 on 21 May 1993, there have been significant changes in the political situation in the Middle East. The signing of the Declaration of Principles at Oslo on 13 September 1993, the pledging of US$ 2.3 billion on 1 October 1993 at the subsequent donors' conference and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in the Gaza Strip and Jericho have reflected well on the dual-track diplomacy process established by the Madrid Conference, under the stewardship of the United States of America and of the Russian Federation, and with the crucial intermediary role of the Norwegian Government. Most of all, political accommodation by the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization has laid the foundation for a lasting peace in the Middle East, despite the formidable obstacles which still remain.

2. One result of these changes is that UNEP now has access to the Occupied Territories and has been able to pursue the implementation of decision 17/31, even though the drastically altered circumstances have warranted a different approach. For example, significant initiatives have been taken by the World Bank, UNDP and the Government of the Netherlands in the field of the environment. The Government of Austria is assisting an environmental non-governmental organization (NGO) in the West Bank in the field of environmental data and the Government of the Netherlands has called for an environmental profile of Gaza and is planning to commence work in the West Bank later in 1995.

3. From the reports of these various projects and programmes it is clear that serious environmental problems exist in the Gaza Strip. The influx of large numbers of refugees (575,000 out of the total population of 850,000) has led to high population densities, particularly in the refugee camps. Over the 27 years of occupation, there has been a significant degradation of the natural and human environment. Overexploitation of groundwater has led to a drop in water levels and saline intrusion in the coastal zone. Poor solid waste collection, transport and disposal systems pose a public health hazard and an environmental threat. Inadequate domestic water supplies and poor wastewater systems also threaten health.

4. It is considered that human and animal life is directly threatened and this requires an immediate response. Elsewhere, the unsustainable use of scarce natural resources may inhibit the economic and social development of the Gaza Strip in the medium term**.

5. Given the above-mentioned initiatives, it became important for UNEP not duplicate these efforts, but rather to direct its attention to the second part of decision 17/31. Thus the main progress has been in assisting Palestinian capacity-building in the field of the environment.

** Gaza Environmental Profile, part one: Inventory of Resources, Palestinian Environmental Protection Authority/Euroconsult/International Water Consultants (IWACO). The Benevolent Society for the Gaza Strip, Gaza, June 1994, 60p.

6. The existence of the dual-track process has also imposed ground rules on the way in which UNEP has been able to provide such assistance. UNEP is represented in both the Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources, in which the UNEP representative heads the United Nations delegation, and the Multilateral Working Group on the Environment. In both Working Groups, assistance in regional cooperation is closely governed by the procedures established by the regional parties and the sponsors.

7. In the case of direct assistance to the Palestinian people, which at present is largely to Gaza, United Nations assistance is now controlled by the Office of the Secretary-General's Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories (UNSCO), headed by Mr. Terje Rod Larsen. This office has established both inter-agency and bilateral mechanisms to ensure that assistance is delivered in a timely and coordinated fashion.

8. UNEP will play an active role in two of the Working Groups established by UNSCO, dealing with infrastructure and housing and health. In addition, it has responded to specific assistance requests made by representatives of the Palestinian National Authority prior to the establishment of the coordinating mechanism.

Specific assistance to the Palestinian National Authority

9. The principal assistance provided by UNEP has been in the field of environmental information networks and decision support systems. Such networks and data systems are an essential prerequisite for environmental planning systems, environmental impact assessment and sustainable development. The decision support systems will enable planners and decision makers to assess the social, economic and environmental impacts of different development scenarios and to choose options on the basis of objective and quantifiable indicators. With the assistance of the Government of Norway, the detailed formulation phase of this project was launched in early 1995 after discussions with the Palestinian authorities on the most appropriate institutional framework to adopt. The newly formed Palestinian Environmental Planning Directorate will be the hub of the environmental networks and the chief repository of environmental databases.

10. Because of the lack of institutional infrastructure and the scattered nature of the available environmental data, the project will aim at strengthening or establishing "satellite" databases in municipalities, universities and appropriate NGOs. These will be linked to the Environmental Planning Directorate, which, in turn, will have access to international networks when outside information is required. The project should become fully operational in mid-1995, given the approval of the capacity-building programme. In addition, Infoterra is seeking to establish the Environmental Planning Directorate as a cooperating centre, with the intention of assisting it to become a national Infoterra focal point in due course.

11. Another UNEP initiative is directed towards capacity-building within the Gaza municipality. In view of the large infrastructural investments which will take place through bilateral and multilateral assistance, it is essential to establish a capacity for planning, monitoring and assessing environmental aspects of this complex development programme. Such an environmental health and human settlements database and planning centre will also be a major node on the environmental network serving the Environmental Planning Directorate.

12. One continuing activity in cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) has been the promotion of environmental health and development in Palestine refugee camps. This activity has involved the training of environmental health officers and support to the subsequent training of camp sanitation officers. Approximately 100 camp sanitation officers have been trained under this programme, and a manual on environmental health in refugee camps has been produced. Arrangements are being made to augment the training activities through supervision of the trainers by the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office of WHO. This activity will conclude in December 1995.

Regional cooperation

13. Through the two multilateral working groups of the multilateral peace talks, UNEP has been able to play a part in the activities set out in sub-paragraphs a-d below.

(a) Desertification

A major desertification initiative was undertaken by the World Bank which culminated in a programme which was presented to the regional parties in October 1994. Part of this programme is the Arava Valley Project, which was initiated by the Interim Secretariat of the Convention to Combat Desertification and is to be implemented by the Drylands Ecosystems and Desertification Control Programme of UNEP.

The Arava Valley was the site of the historic signing of the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel on 23 October 1994. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that it should be the one of the first tripartite projects to be implemented in the desertification initiative.

(b) Desalination

At the Muscat meeting of the Multilateral Working Group on Water Resources in 1993, a proposal was made by the Government of Oman to establish a regional centre for desalination research. This proposal found overwhelming support among the regional and extra-regional parties. Desalination is seen not only as a potentially clean technology which can release the pressure from many overstressed water sources in the Middle East, but also as a future competitor with conventional water production systems, if the costs can be reduced by technological improvements.

Five years ago, desalination costs world-wide were of the order of US $5 per cubic metre of processed water. Now, costs of less than US $2 are reported, with even lower costs in the case of brackish water.

From an environmental point of view, UNEP views the establishment of the desalination research centre as an important and timely initiative to combat increasing stress in arid lands and a possible factor in solving the increasing competition for natural resources which is at the heart of the Middle East peace process.

UNEP has promised support to the Government of Oman in accelerating the process of establishing the centre. This activity is undertaken in concert with the catalytic and coordinating efforts of the United States State Department.

(c) Training in environmental impact assessment

As part of the programme on regional training coordinated by the European Union, UNEP will organize the second training course on environmental impact assessment in the second half of 1995. The training course will draw participants from the whole Middle East region with priority given to Palestinian candidates.

(d) Report on environmental problems in the Middle East region

A report on environmental problems in the Middle East region and the possible contribution of UNEP to their solution was presented to the Multilateral Working Group on the Environment, which met in Tokyo, Japan from 24-25 May 1993. This brief report identified desertification and soil degradation as being a major problem in the Middle East and suggested capacity-building measures which could be taken and in which UNEP could play an important role. The report also detailed UNEP's activities in the Middle East region.